

The Macomb Daily

Hackel's four appointees move forward

Board has nothing but praise for exec's picks



POWELL



PROVENZANO



HACKEL

By Chad Selweski - Macomb Daily Staff Writer - March 16, 2011

The Mark Hackel administration took on a clearer shape Tuesday as the Board of Commissioners expressed no opposition to four appointees put forward by the county executive.

The confirmation hearing was long, lasting three hours, but the commissioners had nothing but good things to say about the department heads chosen by Hackel: Rhonda Powell, director of Senior Services; Pete Provenzano, director of Finance; Eric Herppich, director of Human Resources; and Robert Hoepfner, director of Roads.

Powell's confirmation seemed to be the subject of a budding controversy last week when some commissioners had indicated privately that they were uncomfortable with her background in running homeless shelters, rather than working specifically with seniors. In addition, a master's degree is preferred in the job description while Powell hopes to secure an online master's degree by the end of the year.

Two leaders in the black community expressed concern last week when the appointment of Powell, who is African-American, was left off of Tuesday's agenda. They initially feared that past questionable hiring practices with racial overtones had come to the fore again, but later agreed that the faulty agenda was merely a county board procedural matter. Powell was subsequently added to the agenda.

Greg Murray, spokesman for the Macomb Ministerial Alliance, a group of black ministers, blamed a Macomb Daily news story for unnecessarily creating tension surrounding Powell's confirmation process.

"The Macomb Ministerial Alliance won't be agitated into a fight with the Board of Commissioners," Murray told the board. "We want to start out our relationship (with the new board) on a fair, equitable, reasonable manner."

No confirmation votes were taken but the process is clearly moving in that direction, with all four expected to win board approval.

Powell, the director of a countywide shelter program that relies upon 90 churches, pleased the commissioners by stressing the need for greater efficiency in the department and more partnerships with local senior centers. Because the Senior Services Department budget has been slashed by 50 percent in recent years, Powell said she is willing to consider using volunteers to fill some of the holes in the department's work force.

As the director of MCREST, the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team, Powell has cared for homeless people ranging from seniors to children. In that position, she said she trains 1,000 volunteers a year.

"As leaders, I think it's our responsibility to make sure that we are leaving people in our footsteps, so that we can always ensure the continuance of what we do, and that we're developing experts, people who are confident in what they do, because that sense of confidence transcends to the population we serve," she

said.

Provenzano, the Roseville assistant city manager, also seemed to score big points with the commissioners while answering their questions. He stressed his experience slashing the city's big budget deficit and arranging changes in employee health insurance that produced substantial savings.

As county finance director, Provenzano said he would pursue cost-saving consolidations of services provided by cities and townships, putting them under the county's roof. He said assessing, purchasing, payroll and police dispatch services could be consolidated into county services and the financial benefits could be shared by all those who take part.

"We need some very, very creative solutions. We can't rely on how things were done in the past," he said, referring to past years when the local economy was strong and many government budgets sported a surplus. "It's a whole new ball game."

Provenzano played a major role in creating the new dispatch center that combined the services of Roseville, St. Clair Shores and Eastpointe. He said that new consortium has drawn the attention of several cities, including some in neighboring Wayne County, who want to join.

Herppich and Hoepfner were in a much different position at Tuesday's confirmation hearing, as they are interim directors seeking permanent status as department heads. In addition, they were very familiar to all but the freshman commissioners.

Hoepfner had 36 years of experience at the road commission, the forerunner of the Department of Roads. Herppich has 20 years of service at the Human Resources Department and served the past two years as either the acting or interim director.

The four appointments now go to the Finance Committee next Tuesday to discuss the pay rates proposed by Hackel — a salary range of \$114,750 to \$127,500 for Provenzano, Herppich and Hoepfner, and a salary range of \$69,336 to \$86,670 for Powell.

The full board will vote on the appointments next week on Thursday. Some commissioners complained about the process established by Commissioner Kathy Tocco, chairwoman of the committee that handled Tuesday's confirmation hearing.

Tocco said her intent was to give the Board Operations Committee, which is a committee of the whole, time to digest and review the appointees' comments before voting, rather than casting one vote now and one at the full board, where final approval is required. A Fraser Democrat, Tocco reminded her colleagues that they are setting precedent for how Hackel's appointments will be handled in the future.

Commissioner Marv Sauger, a Center Line Democrat, complained that the board was "just passing the buck to another committee." After a motion to immediately vote for confirmation was rejected by a majority of the committee, some commissioners complained that the four candidates were put into an ambiguous situation.

"If any of the candidates leaves here today thinking that they don't have the support of this board, well, shame on them," responded Commissioner Phil Di-Maria, an Eastpointe Democrat. "I think it's pretty clear where the board stands."

Tuesday's session marked the first time since Hackel took office on Jan. 1 that one of the county executive's team appeared before the board. Deputy Executive Mark Deldin answered questions about the appointment process, despite a prior memo from Hackel to the board that said the commissioners have no authority to question the internal procedures of his office.

Deldin said the four positions were not posted or advertised but Herppich and Hoepfner were inhouse picks and Provenzano and Powell were sought out. All four were interviewed multiple times by the executive and members of his staff before being chosen by Hackel, according to Deldin.

As the new county government enters its 11th week, Hackel still hasn't appointed one of the three assistant executives he's allowed under the new county charter.

All other department heads left over from 2010, prior to the charter government, are expected to stay on, at least in the short term.